

*Living Democracy*  
A CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE OF  
CHILDREN WITH MULTIPLE  
HANDICAPS.  
Vita Stein

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## Living Democracy —

### A Classroom Experience of Children With Multiple Handicaps

Vita Stein

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WITH considerable stage fright, with an intense feeling of insecurity and armed with dictionary, encyclopedia, and all kinds of textbooks, I entered my classroom on the opening day of school. The children in the class offered to me were visually, mentally, and emotionally handicapped. But I feared this promise of hard work less than my own handicap, my incomplete grasp of the English language. I had come recently as an immigrant from Vienna where I had been a principal in a school for socially maladjusted children.



Vita Stein

When confronted with these children for the first time, all the usual speeches of introduction were discarded. I said merely: "I am a stranger; my homeland is far away from here. Would you boys and girls like to be my friends and help me with my English? I

would love to learn very much about your country."

The response was amazing. Every pupil offered his friendship and help with the greatest enthusiasm. Their sympathy with my handicap made them completely forget their own insufficiency and this was the reaction for which I had hoped. All wanted to be my teachers. "Would you like to learn counting with me?" or "May I teach you to recite the English alphabet?" or "Do you know how to say the English names for the months?" were some of the

offers put to me.

To maintain my place as a teacher, I made the children understand that I, too, should like to help them with their difficulties. Without any inhibitions they told me about their big and little problems. There was

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Her training was received at the Teachers Training School, Vienna, where she earned a bachelor of science degree in education; at Columbia University, New York City, where she received her master of arts degree; at the University of Paris, where she received a diploma in education and languages; and at Columbia University, New York, and the University of Vienna, Austria, where she worked toward her doctor's degree. She is at present working toward her doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University, in the educational and psychological guidance of exceptional children.

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a little blind boy that could not do arithmetic, another that did not like to read Braille; a most attractive looking girl with fair curls and dimples in her cheeks had a hard time finding her way around the school; a small, sturdy colored fellow did not care for geography—his greatest and only longing was to become an Indian chief.

At the close of the first day it seemed that every one of us felt that he was to embark upon an important mission. My youngsters felt responsible for my well-being and for my language improvement. I, on the other hand, had great hope that I would be able to give these seriously handicapped children the unique experience of success and happiness that they needed more than anything else.

As I was interested in a rather elementary American education, primarily to serve me for the needs of my class, we started with simple studies such as: American money, various types of measurements, and other details useful in daily life. We also studied the lives of famous American people and the stories behind our holidays. Whenever possible, guests, young and old, were invited to speak on subjects of current interest to us. We took trips to the World's Fair, to museums, and collected everything worth while, such as: tokens, money, flags, dolls, and the like, for an exhibition of our own.

Whatever we undertook in our activities, in and outside of school, uppermost in the minds of the children was the idea of their being my teachers. In our discussions the boys and girls were extremely considerate, speaking slowly and clearly. They often interrupted themselves asking: "Do you understand?"

To please me especially, they made

frequent use of English expressions which I pretended to like particularly well, such as: May I try, may I help, thank you, please, and the like.

Very soon this small group of helpers grew larger, for a few weeks later the parents also became interested in my American education. They sent maps, pictures, travel stories, and invited me to sight-seeing trips or to visits in their homes.

In a relatively short time, we all noticed a marked improvement in the class. Most of the children had lost their timidity and insecurity and had become more self-confident, responsible, and cooperative in their behavior. Whenever I mentioned progress and improvement on their part, I, too, was assured that I showed great improvement as well. When, as preface to corrective remarks directed to them, I referred to my own difficulty with English I was sure to be consoled. On one occasion an appealing little colored boy said to me: "You know, Mrs. Stein, nobody is perfect."

Their appreciation of this fact made it easier for me to refer to their limitations, when necessary, without hurting their feelings. Frequently lively discussions were started. At times, when a child made a correction in my speech, others would protest and say: "You shouldn't correct her, she said it just right."

It also happened that mistakes were occasionally accepted without criticism. For instance I used to say *stolper* (the German word) for *stumble*. When I became aware of this mistake and asked why they had not corrected me, the answer was: "We did understand what you meant and we liked *stolper* so much better than *stumble*."

Undoubtedly our methods and means

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proposition that you think that body should consider.

SAMUEL A. KIRK  
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## Living Democracy

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of studying differed in many ways from the usual routine. We were getting our information not by merely listening to a classroom teacher, by exercise and drill, but by the adventure of exploring and experimenting, by interviewing people, by listening to the radio, and by collecting all kinds of interesting things. We were busy as pioneers in a new land. No ready-made goods were available. We had to dig and to hew and to fabricate our material by our own efforts. All this required initiative, creative activity, originality, and enthusiasm which, in turn, made for a tolerance and social cooperation that the children had not experienced before.

I myself was very dependent on the dictionary and encyclopedia. When-

ever a question arose, we asked these books for help. So great was my students' confidence in these silent helpers, that when I could not give a satisfactory answer to their question as to "What God looks like," a very gentle voice asked: "Mrs. Stein, why don't you look up the dictionary?"

We have now been working in closest cooperation for about two years. In looking over this period I may say that our classroom work has been a true experience in living democracy and a real opportunity for continuous practice of those qualities that are so essential for better human relationship.

## Test Construction

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tests are standardized are but two of the causes of lack of IQ constancy due to test construction. They are presented to make the reader aware of the fact that IQ inconstancy may be due to defects inherent in the mental measurement technique as well as to other factors which may be more highly dramatized.

## Planning for the Next Depression

Each year 1,750,000 youth leave school to seek employment. A piling up of several million unemployed, inexperienced new workers will be inevitable in the post-war period, unless advance planning finds a way out of the dilemma. There is reason to believe that the number of youth who will not be able to find employment in private enterprise or non-emergency government work might easily surpass the four million of the thirties and may reach five or six million during the period of transition from defense to peace time activities.

FLOYD W. REEVES, Director  
American Youth Commission  
In the Journal of Educational Sociology

## Adults' Idea of Amusement

There is too much laughter and ridicule at children's expense, not only by parents, but also by teachers.

GARRY CLEVELAND MYERS, Editor  
Children's Activities

cial teachers.

Local Membership: Miss Genevieve Byrne, teacher of educationally retarded.

Financial: Miss Mary H. Broderick, principal, Gaenslen Orthopedic School.

## The President's Page

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and publication of the Journal. Plans for the payment of the capital investment involved, and the necessary organization for assuming control is being considered by the committee.

3. Organization of the Council. The present organization of the International Council, which has served the Council well since its beginning, may not be the best organization for our present membership and for functions that the Council has now taken on. At present the membership has increased, the Journal has been expanded and the Council has been affiliated with the National Education Association. The latter necessitates two meetings of the organization annually, one in February, and one in July during the annual meeting of the Association. As it now operates, a president, a vice president, a recording secretary, and a board of directors manage the affairs of the Council. A treasurer-manager serves the Council as its membership secretary, treasurer, and to some extent as an executive secretary. The latter is a part-time employee of the Board, and a part-time employee of the Journal, with more than a full-time job. The committee is studying the present organization of the Council and may recommend some changes to the board of directors if the committee feels

that a different type of organization is best for the growth of the Council.

4. How the International Council can best utilize its affiliation with the National Education Association for the welfare of exceptional children is also under consideration by the committee. This affiliation means that we can contribute to a larger group of educators and that some contributions can be made by other colleagues to special education.

5. The aims and objectives of the International Council. These have been stated many times in numerous publications, but the Council has now reached a point when some of these purposes should be vitalized and put into practice. A committee is at work redefining the purposes of the Council stating how the Council can achieve these aims, and suggesting to chapters ways and means of attaining these objectives.

The present world crisis not only affects the adults, but unfortunately affects many children, who had nothing to do with the present chaos. The tragedy is increasing the number of handicapped children throughout the world. Thus a greater responsibility is going to be placed upon the International Council. A committee is now being formed to formulate post-war plans for the education and rehabilitation of handicapped children and adults.

Remember—we live in a democracy and we want the International Council democratically operated. You have voice in its management and a responsibility for its functioning. Any suggestions or ideas that you may have should be addressed to Mrs. Norris or to the president. All suggestions will be given careful consideration. Furthermore you are invited to come to the board of directors' meetings and present an

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